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By David Rogers

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With
a bad knee and worse press clippings, Rep. John Murtha is the very image of the wounded caribou, picking his way across Washington's ice floes, while Republicans and major newspapers vie for the chance to pull him under.

After months of pounding, the Pennsylvania Democrat is described as either an icon from the past or a fool going into the future. Yet there is a stubborn endurance about him, too, captured by the dark-blue wool Union Army cap worn by Murtha's great-grandfather in the Civil War.

He keeps that in his office, and at 77 next month, this stuck-in-the-past pork barrel artist may yet confound his critics again by forging an alliance with Defense Secretary Robert Gates in this summer's ground war over reshaping the Pentagon's budget.

Indeed, past defense appropriations bills shaped by Murtha show a striking overlap with many of Gates's priorities. And at a hearing Wednesday, the chairman gently teased the secretary for now wanting to trim outside contractors when the Pentagon resisted Murtha's efforts to do the same last year.

But with Murtha's blessing, much of the session became Gates's own show, as the secretary — always polite but also brutal — dissected the ineffectiveness of costly weapons systems committee members hoped to save.

"I'm impressed, Mr. Secretary. You have been deeply involved in this budget. You answered the questions. You know what the hell's going on," Murtha said to laughter from Gates. "That's interesting for a secretary. Very unusual."

"I really do think they have an excellent working relationship," Geoff Morrell, Gates's press secretary, told POLITICO. "They meet one on one more often than not, and these are very candid conversations. ... They are two survivors of a tough town."

"They have approached issues from different sides of the spectrum but get along professionally, and both trust the other has the interest of the troops at heart," he said. "Gates respects people who are patriots and care about the welfare of the troops, and it's unequivocally true that Chairman Murtha does."

Relations won't always be so kind. There are real differences over how to buy new tankers for the Air Force or what can be salvaged from \$3.5 billion already spent on a botched presidential helicopter. And Gates has made the procurement debate such a defining personal issue that some fear the secretary has left himself little room for compromise.

At the same time, Murtha must adapt to slower growth in defense spending and a less permissive, zero-sum budget framework.

To the extent the Bush administration never formally budgeted for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it fostered a system of open-ended emergency spending bills and "bridge funds" for the Pentagon, whose annual costs more than doubled, from \$316 billion in 2001 to \$667 billion in 2008.

In this atmosphere, Murtha was often a go-to ally for the military services seeking add-ons for their needs. Now Gates has taken the reins more forcefully, and Murtha knows he will have to find cuts to pay for the priorities he wants.

The great constant is his hunger still to be a player.

The Union Army cap in Murtha's office once belonged to his mother's grandfather Abraham, who lost an arm in the Civil War. But the greater influence was Abraham's widow, Mary, who lived into her 90s next door and famously told the future congressman, "You are on this earth to make a difference."

All the tough Marine talk came apart on the House floor in March 2007, when Murtha choked up while recalling her words in an emotional speech against the Iraq war. And Republicans devoted millions last fall to punish him for his anti-war stance and willingness to speak out about the death of Iraqi civilians at the hands of Marines in Haditha. Add in the cloud of federal investigations into lobbyists and contractors who have benefited from Murtha's pork barrel politics, and the past six months have been a public beating — even as no charges have been brought.

"I don't worry about that, because I know there's nothing there," the chairman said defiantly. And for all the allegations of selling earmarks for campaign contributions, no one has shown — quite unlike past earmark scandals involving other lawmakers — that Murtha was enriched personally.

Gates himself knows a little about this side of Washington, having gone through his own rough period in the '80s, when the fallout from the Iran-Contra scandal painfully delayed his appointment as director of the CIA. Like Murtha, Gates isn't a social animal. But the two men came to know one another during Gates' CIA tenure. And since returning to government, the secretary has made himself available to Murtha, typically meeting alone, without aides, at either the Pentagon or the congressman's office.

It's not a lovefest, but there is a shared respect. And in trying to make the defense budget more attuned to the "war fighter" in the field, Gates is talking to a Vietnam War veteran who has single-mindedly pumped billions into military health care programs and is famous for checking the boots of soldiers when he visits bases.

"Jack Murtha always wants to be a reliable partner for the secretary of defense," said John Hamre, a top department official in the '90s and now president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. Indeed, the most celebrated Murtha-defense secretary partnership was with no less than Dick Cheney, who left the House to run the Pentagon for President George H.W. Bush.

When the first Gulf War followed, Cheney and Murtha seemed almost indistinguishable at times. Quite the opposite was the case with Iraq and President George W. Bush, with Cheney as vice president. And Murtha welcomed Gates' return after the 2006 elections as a replacement for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Gates' willingness to stay on under President Barack Obama has also liberated him, said Murtha, who describes the secretary as less restrained and more willing

to assert himself, as he has done on military procurement.

"I think he's now stepped out of the shadows. ... He's able to do it himself and not somebody else at the White House," Murtha said. "He's much more confident of his own ability to make decisions now. They let him make the decisions. That's the difference."

In truth, there was an almost understated sarcasm Wednesday when Gates told Murtha's panel that "we should be able to secure our nation with a base budget of more than a half-trillion dollars." Asked to defend cuts in the airborne laser program, the secretary said bluntly that U.S. planes would have to orbit inside the borders of Iran for the system to be effective today. A second anti-missile program might work against North Korea if it could get close enough but is about 39 feet long, Gates estimates, and weighs 12 tons, and there's no ship today "we can put it on."

The Army's infantry fighting vehicle — conceived at 18.5 tons nine years ago — is "probably headed toward 35 tons" after a litany of changes. The VH-71 helicopter, which Gates wants to scrap entirely, suffers from the same sort of problems and has the added challenge of having to fly. "This program is a poster child for an acquisition process gone seriously wrong," Gates said.

Left out of the presentation is the fact that the same Pentagon was asking for more money for many of the same weapons systems just a year ago. Asking Congress to walk away entirely is difficult in some cases, not just because of pressure from contractors but because of embarrassment.

"I'm going to put money in for that presidential helicopter whether he likes it or not," Murtha said later. "He may object, but we're not going to spend \$3.5 billion and not have some helicopter out of it."

But much of what Gates is asking for, Murtha says he can accept and will support — just as many in the services have fallen in behind the secretary.

"I was so impressed by how well Gates answered each question," Murtha said. And the chairman's own relationship with Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, factors into this.

"Mullen told me [Gates] was more involved in these decisions. Everybody came to him with bottom-up [proposals], and then he made the decisions himself. The reason the services are so cooperative with him now ... is because they feel they have to give him a chance."

